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ABSTRACT

This article, primarily a critical review of Wayne O'Neil's study "The Politics of Bidialectalism," defines and examines sociological and pedagogical implications of the concepts of bidialectalism and biloquilism. It is argued that any definition of bidialectalism which refers to linguistic differentiation on the basis of social class is implicitly a racist conceptualization of the term itself. Selected linguistic examples illustrate how standard English is becoming simplified and, thus, easier for speakers of nonstandard English to acquire. Concluding remarks concentrate on reasons why students should reject the notions of bidialectalism or biloquilism as defined by O'Neil in favor of standard English. (RL)

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# The Case Against Bidialectalism

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Bidialectalism or Biloquilism, according to Wayne O'Neil in "The Politics of Bidialectalism" in College English (January 1972) "refers to a movement in education systematically to render lower-class students able to speak both their native dialect and standard English".

This definition introduces a racist attack on Bidialectalism and its pernicious ramifications, and closes with the statement that Bidialectalism "is part of the social and political machinery meant to control." The gross implications of this belief need clarification.

I disagree with much of what O'Neil writes. And, since he discusses a number of the major aspects of Bidialectalism which require analysis and development before there is understanding, I have chosen to present my views of Bidialectalism in the form of a commentary on the major conclusions of his approach to the subject.

Basically, I make no effort to "render" my students* "able to speak both their native dialect and standard English", because I believe that such a pluralistic approach is not only impossible, but highly undesirable. Rather, my approach is a practical variation on that theme.

(1) I make my students (Black, for the most part, but occasionally Chicano, Indian or White) aware of their dialect: (a) I make them aware that it is a dialect (if it is); (b) that, as such, it is a recognizable mode of speech; (c) that they need not be ashamed of it, because it came to them as naturally as the way they pronounce their words or use them.

(2) I let them know what that dialect is: (a) Its spoken characteristics; (b) its written characteristics; and (c) how these characteristics relate to the standard English dialect, generally and specifically.

* Only those who fail the freshman English tests and are considered pre-college in their ability to use the Standard English dialect.

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(3) I encourage them to be aware that their dialect has been their official mode of communication in most areas of their daily activity, except possibly in some scholastic, or meaningful social or business relationships, and that it is, therefore, not to be despised, per se, because it is a dialect, and because many White teachers, educators and researchers, and many Black ones, have branded it as generally inferior to the standard dialect.

(4) I indicate that it had an important place in their lives and may continue to do so, though much less significantly, and that that degree of importance will largely depend on where and how they plan to operate in the future.

(5) BUT--I do not make any attempt to "render" my students able to speak their native dialect, although I work overtime, and use every facet of my creativity and experience to make them able to speak standard English. And I make it as clear as I know how that that is my primary goal, after I make all the other goals clear.

Next, O'Neil says that Bidialectalism "is a less vague and haphazard continuation of earlier attempts, as old as popular education, to eradicate dialect".

First, I don't know what those "earlier attempts" were that he alluded to because he didn't say.

Second, I make it clear that I am not deliberately attempting to eradicate dialect. I may succeed indirectly, to some degree or other, buy my conscious attempt is to give these students what they told me they wanted during the first few days of the trimester--a dialect of English: that would enable them to get through their classes, to handle the communication related to their Co-operative Education assignments, to graduate from college, to get a job, to keep that job, and to succeed with that job. And that's what I try to do. And that's obviously not what O'Neil (and other proponents of Bidialectalism) believe in.

Next, O'Neil says that Bidialectalism "offers the lower class a traditional choice: convert so that the on-going social game will be fairer to you. There is no offer to change the rules of the game."

Isn't it better to "convert" and have a chance of making it in life, than not to convert and virtually confine yourself to failure? In addition, the "game" will

be "fairer", as O'Neil admits. But what is most important is that by helping the lower-class students to convert, I am doing what they want me to do. And that's far more than O'Neil ever offered to do.

As for the fact that "there is no offer to change the rules of the game," that should come as no surprise to O'Neil--or to anyone else. In fact, it's almost not worth mentioning. Do New England schools teach the New England dialect? Do Norfolk schools teach the Norfolk dialect? No, they teach the standard dialect, while accepting the fact of the existence of their own.

Furthermore, since when has changing the rules been easy, or the first thing one expected? If the game of Scrabble, for example, discriminates against lower-class students because they don't know the usual vocabulary of the standard dialect (and it does), would anyone dream of changing the rules and allowing misspellings, or words that don't yet exist in the language? Hardly! And if so, what good would it do?

However, if some enterprising person could utilize these aspects of their dialect within the confines of the basic rules, then there would be no reason to change the rules. Certainly, when a football team loses its great running and blocking backs, but has a fine passing quarterback and some excellent pass-receivers, the coach doesn't continue to insist on a running game. Rather, he develops a passing game--within the rules of football, of course.

Next, O'Neil says that Bidialectalism "is meant mostly for lower-class blacks and not for the lower class in general".

That may be true because there are more Blacks in his experience with a dialect that differs significantly from the standard dialect than there are Whites, or Chicanos, or Puerto-Ricans, or Hawaiians, or children of foreign-born parents. In any event, Bidialectalism does incorporate every lower-class student who has a dialect that differs enough from standard English to be an obstacle to success in life.

Next, O'Neil says that Bidialectalism "comes at a time when many blacks are piecing together their identity, saving it from powerful attempts to fragment and destroy it".

What are all those characteristics that mark the identity of lower-class Blacks? Let me cite a few:

(1) Their non-standard dialect which makes success in a world dominated by the White-inspired standard English dialect virtually impossible;

(2) their proneness to sickle-cell anemia, a disease which we have been told by scientists is almost wholly peculiar to the Blacks, and which appears to affect one of every 10 Blacks;

(3) their lack of education;

(4) their lack of those cultural attributes that the rulers of the WASP society find so necessary to success;

(5) their lack of self-discipline, and inability to concentrate, making success in education more difficult;

(6) their lack of motivation for distant goals;

(7) their seeming proneness to various perceptual disabilities which severly retard their ability to perform as normal human beings in an educational environment; and

(8) their frequent failure to maintain success in marriage, and to continue to provide for their families after separation or divorce.

I chose these aspects of the identity of lower-class, uneducated Blacks (some of which also identify other lower-class students, both White and otherwise) to show that everything that marks the heritage of the lower-class Blacks is not, per se, so wonderful or so appealing or so good that it ought automatically to be saved.

Consider their dialect, for example. Linguists and language scientists, both White and Black, have never been able to prove what characteristics of the various Black dialects are actually dialect and which are merely imperfections of the standard dialect. So, all of what has been loosely called Black dialect heretofore, is not necessarily a part of the Black cultural heritage.

What about their proneness to sickle-cell anemia, a debilitating disease for which there is yet no cure? Can you believe that there is one Black person in the world who sincerely wants to treasure this part of his heritage? Is there one Black who would not fall to his knees and thank God and the saviour who fragmented their lives sufficiently to destroy the sickle-cell germs forever?

Looking at the above characteristics that are part of the identity of many lower-class Blacks leads me to conclude that it would be a marvelous stroke of genius on someone's part if he could manage to fragment and destroy all of the characteristics listed above. At least, if the lower-class youths were given a chance to keep or not to keep, they would be delighted to dump these so-called cherished characteristics into the lap of all the O'Neils, and Sledds and Stewarts (James Sledd and William Stewart espouse the same doctrine that O'Neil does in all aspects of Bidialectalism).

Next, O'Neil writes: "This ill-advised attempt to change people (that is, their dialect by teaching them standard English) should be rejected".

This is O'Neil speaking only for O'Neil, and possibly Sledd and Stewart. It is he who calls it an"Ill-advised attempt" and it is he who has concluded that "it should be rejected". There is no attempt to document this conclusion because there is no evidence that he has collected opinions or carried out surveys or research directly related to this conclusion. Certainly, he has never bothered to collect the opinions of those mostly affected by such a judgment--the dialect speakers themselves. It is evident that O'Neil has also not read the April 1971 issue of The Crisis, the official publication of the NAACP, specifically an editorial headed "Black Nonsense," which absolutely rejects conclusions about Bidialectalism like those of O'Neil:

> "The new cult of blackness has spawned many astounding vagaries, most of them harmless, some of them intriguing, and others merely amusing. One which has recently gained a measure of academic and foundation recognition is not only sheer nonsense but also a cruel hoax which, if allowed to go unchallenged, can cripple generations of black youngsters in their preparation to compete in the open market with their non-Negro peers." The editorial writer continues with specific reference to a course in Black English at Brooklyn College which was later canceled by college authorities and officials of the Ford Foundation, who stated that their fundamental purpose was to teach standard English. The writer of the NAACP editorial then continued by presenting the basic position

of the NAACP on the issue of teaching standard English dialect or the Black dialect: "What our children need, and other disadvantaged American children as well--Indian, Spanish-speaking, Asian, Appalachian, and immigrant Caucasion--is training in basic English which today is as near an international language as any in the world. To attempt to lock them into a provincial patois is to limit their opportunities in the world at large. Black children can master Oxonian English as well as any WASP child of the English Midlands. But each has to be taught the language. No one is born speaking 'black', cockney, pidgin, standard, or 'white' English. Children learn to speak what they hear and are taught. Let our children have the opportunity, and be encouraged, to learn the language that will best enable them to comprehend modern science and technology, equip them to communicate intelligently with other English-speaking peoples of all races, and to share in the exercise of national power.

"Black parents throughout this nation should rise up in unanimous condemnation of this insidious conspiracy to cripple their children permanently. It is time to repudiate this black nonsense and to take appropriate action against institutions who foster it in craven capitulation to the fantasies of the extreme black cultists and their pale and spineless sycophants. Let the black voice of protest resound throughout the land!"*

Next, O'Neil writes: "How could we persuade the speaker of...dialect to cease speaking his way and start speaking ours (standard dialect)?"

O'Neil then suggests that "we could...tell him his dialect is wrong." Yes, we could, and I agree with him that this might cause the speakers of the lower-class dialect to react adversely, although I know, from experience, that "severe depression and loss of identity" is not as absolute and automatic as O'Neil claims.

However, it isn't necessary to tell these dialect speakers that their way of speaking is "wrong". I have never had to say it in five years at Wilberforce University because I don't believe it is "wrong". Dialect is a part of a person's identity, and it should not automatically be labeled as wrong, or inferior. It has succeeded in bringing the speakers through their first 18 or 19 years of life, and to the college classroom. Now that they are in college and mature enough to know what their dialect means to them in terms of present classroom success, and future success on the job, the decision about the future of that dialect rightfully belongs to them, and only to them.

*I am indebted to George R. Beissel, a powerful proponent of standard English for all children, for the awareness of the above material. Beissel, a teacher in the Ann Arbor, Mich., public school system, has written numerous books and articles about the standard English dialect.

The teacher must be realistic with them about the impact of their dialect and its part in their future success or failure--in college and on the job after college. They know the realism of life only too well, so any attempt to make arbitrary decisions for them, as O'Neil has chosen to do, won't work. Furthermore, they won't accept any bald statements from their elders that learning the standard dialect is automatically an "ill-advised attempt to change people," and therefore "should be rejected," especially when these adults have no realistic, practical substitute to offer for that standard dialect. And O'Neil admits he has absolutely nothing to offer to replace "this ill-advised attempt to change people".

We know that the rules of standard dialect are quite firmly entrenched in our adult-controlled, White-dominated society, which is, by nature, conservative and reluctant to change. And, as adults get older, they become more set in their ways, that is, more conservative, so that they are obviously less liable to change. Therefore, there seems little immediate likelihood or hope, and for several decades to come, that standard dialect will change significantly to inco porate many of the characteristics of Black dialect.

Yet, changes have come, are in the process of coming right now, and will continue to come in the years ahead, even though they are coming slowly, painfully, and reluctantly.

Proof that changes have come is the common occurrence of certain aspects of standard dialect that once were absolutely taboo: (1) the splitting of the infinitive; (2) the use of dangling prepositions; (3) the habit of beginning some sentences with conjunctions; (4) the use of contractions in newspaper and magazine writing; (5) the use of ephemeral jargon in such writing; (6) the frequent appearance of the use of "I", rather than the rather artificial use of "this writer". In fact, there is change in progress that has not even been recognized officially, but it can be documented

in the speach and writing of educated persons. One good example is the use of everyone or everybody as a plural form, especially when the speaker's or writer's intention is to include everyone, that is, a number of persons.

A few additional examples should suffice to support my belief that change is in progress: the more frequent use of irregardless and its greater acceptance by our dictionary editors; the frequent use of "It's me" for "It's I"; the acceptance of "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should" (like being the offender here, according to traditional standard dialect); the use of can and may as synonyms; the loss of distinction between will and shall; the weakening and virtual elimination of the subjunctive; the habit of even educated speakers of dropping syllables at the ends of words; and a long series of other usages. Put all these changes together and you have positive proof that the standard dialect is constantly undergoing change--and this change is inexorably in the direction of the Black dialect.

O'Neil's earlier statement that Black dialect speakers can be persuaded to change to standard dialect because it will make them richer was interestingly illustrated: "like being told that there are two ways to get from here to Americana: you can walk or you can hop...but you'd best hop if anyone you don't know is watching".

I agree that the switch to standard will probably make the users somewhat richer than the use of Black dialect will make its users--in education, in business, in industry, and in the professions--but I don't see how walking or hopping can be considered as legitimate parallels to Black and standard dialect. I'm aware that O'Neil believes that it is clever to get the humorous point across that the Whites are making the Blacks "hop" to the tune of standard dialect, but the analogy ends there--on a sour note. Yes, there is still discrimination, in spite of all the positive strides made with civil rights legislation, the successes of Blacks in virtually every walk of life, and other examples. But I don't believe that the use of standard dialect is conscious or

even unconscious discrimination. However, I must admit that anyone wishing to do so could actually claim that every law, rule, regulation, custom, habit, and attitude in America is discrimination, because our society is still largely White-dominated and White-oriented.

In fact, there is strong evidence that many White linguists, educators, and teachers are making efforts to simplify the standard dialect. People like Rudolf Flesch, Robert Gunning, Edgar Dale and Jean Chall have been at work for several decades on changes of the rules so that standard dialect can become easier, clearer, simpler. Some of their principles are: (1) use the short word instead of the long one, like use for utilize; (2) use the Anglo-Saxon word (like bruise) instead of its Latin-originated equivalent (contusion); (3) use the descriptive verb (like sauntered) instead of the general verb (walked); (4) write shorter sentences, more in the style of journalism than of academic writing; (5) write more like you talk; (6) use more pronouns and more personal references; (7) use more concrete details and fewer generalizations; (8) use the first person, instead of the impersonal "one"; (9) use references to the reader, "you", whenever possible. And these pioneers, and their followers, have had considerable success. For example, both the Associated Press and the United Press International (the two major press services in this country) have adopted this new style. Also, countless numbers of our current writers have been affected by these changes, as is evidenced by their writing in every popular magazine, and even in our academic journals.

Next, O'Neil makes a very provocative statement: Bidialectalism "ensures the status quo; it ensures that workers will be alienated from their labor, that managers' sons will be managers, the laborers' sons laborers, etc. It puts people in their place. This quite correct analysis (the italics are mine to remind you that this statement appears in what purports to be a scholarly article in what English

teachers accept as a scholarly journal) is best described at length in an admirable book by eight Italian school children...." Then, O'Neil adds, "On this analysis (the statements in the book by eight white Italian children) it follows that teaching standard dialect is a piece of educational emptiness".

Admittedly, teaching the standard dialect does tend to keep that dialect alive. However, as I pointed out above, this dialect has undergone many significant changes---all in the direction of the Black dialect. And the rest of the White culture has undergone similar and almost unbelievable changes in favor of the minority cultures (especially the Black). The media carry proof of these changes daily. For example, Sammy Davis, entertaining U.S. troops in VietNam last spring, said that the treatment of Blacks in the U.S. armed forces had undergone "152,000 percent". I am sure that the obvious exaggeration got the point across--that those changes are noticeable and significant. Look at everything that has been done to protect minority rights from World War II to the present time,and especially in the past two decades. So, it is becoming increasingly more obvious that the status quo is hardly "quo" any longer.

And what does O'Neil cite as evidence for the maintenance of the "status quo"? Yes, "an admirable book by eight Italian (White, I presume) school children". Isn't that some conclusion? But the real shocker comes when O'Neil concludes that as a result of "this analysis" (from a book by eight White children) it follows that teaching standard dialect is a "piece of educational emptiness". And, since there is no attempt to relate one single detail from this remarkable book, we have no way of judging the merits of O'Neil's conclusions.

Next, O'Neil says that this teaching of Bidialectalism is "bound to fail" because it makes children "skilled enough to be exploited," "uneducated," "used to failure," and "alienated enough not to oppose exploitation". And he summarizes this entire statement by again quoting the Italian children: "The thing is so clear-cup," he writes, "that we can only smile." Doesn't it generally follow that if one is "skilled enough to be exploited," one would be even more exploitable if less skilled? Well, all I can do, when faced with such evidence of O'Neil's clear-cut illogic, is smile.

Next, O'Neil says that the present concern "to render blacks bidialectal is an attempt at a most obvious kind of political cooptation and a cruel joke to boot." How does O'Neil know this? Did he survey the lower-class Blacks? Obviously not, for he cites no evidence, no statistics, no surveys, no research! Apparently, his unimpeachable source is his own personal conclusion. There is no place for personal animus when the lives of hundreds of thousands of youths are concerned.

Next, O'Neil says that this education in standard dialect to "a particularly vocal and angry segment of the lower class" is "a special but fore-doomed chance to succeed inside the system. It is a crumb...a symbol...nothing more."

First, every Black being taught standard dialect in every school and college in the nation can't possible be a member of "a particular vocal and angry segment", nor do I believe that all these Black students are "angry". And O'Neil, in typical O'Neil distortion, offers no data to support his conclusion. Then, he speaks of a "fore-doomed" chance to succeed inside the system". The presence of Blacks in Congress, in all state houses, in virtually every city government in the nation, and in nearly every walk of life proves rather conclusively that many Blacks are indeed "fore-doomed" to succeed inside the system.

And what O'Neil calls "a crumb" does contain a sizeable effort "which can be readily documented) and which would make that crumb large enough to choke the proverbial elephant! Then he goes on to say "there is no new social, political, or economic justice". This is impossible to accept (in view of the available documentation), unless O'Neil means nothing "new" during some specific short period of time.

Next, O'Neil says that "many Blacks reject the gesture and insist on the primacy of their own cultural identity and dialect, on their right to change American society in fundamental ways...."

What Blacks reject the gesture and insist on their own cultural identity and dialect? O'Neil didn't say because he didn't know. I must assume, therefore, that the conclusion was based on personal animus, as was every other conclusion he made about

dialect and Blacks.

Finally, O'Neil concludes that "education should move people to an exultation in and an understanding of human differences, to the realization that they can control their own destinies, to a realization that stupid, pointless, destructive work is not what life or society is about...." Yes, it is true, but people can only exult when they learn and then begin to control their own destinies. And no lower-class Blacks are going to control anything, including their own destinies, if they listen to O'Neil and his philosophy of illogic.

What of the "false promise to Blacks" that O'Neil mentioned earlier? The nearest thing to a "false promise" is his promise that there is something better now for lower-class Blacks than learning the standard dialect. Nowhere does he offer any solution to what he so utterly rejects. Isn't he the one who offers "a false promise" of something better?

Besides, as Carlton Thomas once told a Wilberforce University graduating class, get an education and learn how to communicate so that you can get jobs in the white man's world. Then, when you're on the inside, start working on changes that will benefit your brothers and sisters. To change the White man's world from the outside takes too long.

Obviously, I don't believe in Bidialectalism, or Biloquilism, or whatever else it has been called. I believe that what the student wants he should get from his teachers and his college, if it is possible. Our students indicated in surveys over a period of two years that they want to learn the standard English dialect. And their support of that viewpoint was virtually 100%! A small minority (about 4%) believe that they should maintain their Black dialect for personal and emotional reasons, but not one of them saw any reason to study it in the classroom. Besides, they have so much to learn, if they are to handle the standard dialect effectively, that there is neither

time, nor energy,nor effective materials to accomplish such a goal, and also study their own dialect. What's more, not one student at Wilberforce has precisely the same characteristics of his Black dialect as any other one. So, the problem of what Black dialect to teach could not be solved easily, if at all. Fortunately, because I know what the students want--to learn the standard dialect which is actually the employable dialect--I am not faced with all the problems that face Wayne O'Neil, and others who believe in Bidialectalism.